Chapter 76: Festival

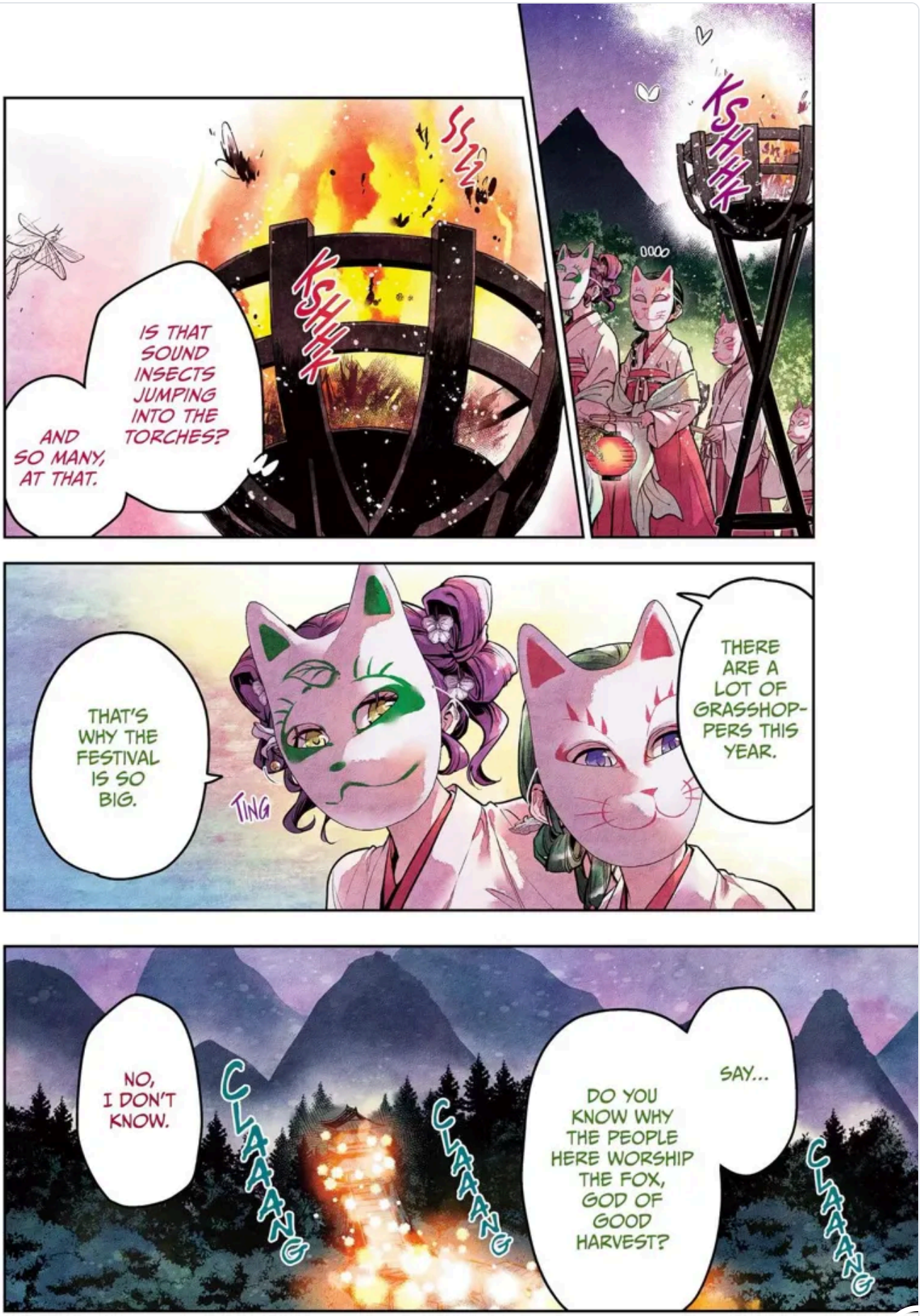
...
SHISUI PAINTED HER FOX MASK.
A GREEN TANUKI?
I SUPPOSE HER INTERESTS LIE IN BUGS, AND NOT ANIMALS.
HM
IT'S NORMAL FOR THE CORNERS OF THE FOX MASK'S EYES TO BE RED ...
...BUT THIS ONE HAS GREEN, DROOPY EYES.

TING
YOUR MASK LOOKS LIKE A KITTY-CAT!
WAIT, NO. THIS IS NO TIME TO LAUGH.
EVEN THAT HAIRPIN OF HERS DEMONSTRATES HER AFFINITY FOR BUGS.
TING
IT'LL BE EASIER TO WEAR THE MASK WITH YOUR HAIR TIED BACK!

HMMM
YOU KNOW... THIS DOESN'T LOOK RIGHT.
I THINK IT FEELS KIND OF EMPTY WITH JUST HAIR TIES.
I KNOW! I CAN LEND YOU A HAIR PIN.
I'VE GOT THIS SUPER CUTE ONE WITH A LITTLE SPIDER-WEB DECORATION.
I WILL POLITELY DECLINE.
BUGS ARE JUST SO NEAT, HUH?
RSTL...
A HAIRPIN ...
USE THIS, THEN.

WOW! WHERE'D YOU GET THIS GORGEOUS ITEM?
IT WAS A GIFT.
HE WOULDN'T FIND OUT IF I JUST KEPT MY MOUTH SHUT...
...BUT IF HE DID...
...THAT FAKE EUNUCH WOULD BE SURE TO THROW A FIT.
UM... WOULD YOU CONSIDER MAYBE... REGIFTING IT TO ME? HM?
...NO.
ALL DONE!
IT'S VERY ODD. HE'S GOTTEN BETTER AT READING MY EXPRESSIONS, OF LATE.

CLAAANG
CLAAANG
CLAAANG
WE'RE WALKING ALL THE WAY TO THE SHRINE AT THE EDGE OF THE VILLAGE.
CLAAANG
IT'S LIKE WE'VE STEPPED INTO ANOTHER WORLD!
...IT ONLY MAKES SENSE THIS EVENT IS HELD IN AUTUMN, WHEN THE HARVEST IS MOST ABUNDANT.
FOR A LAND THAT DEIFIES THE FOX, THE GOD OF HARVEST ...
THE PEOPLE HERE SEEM TO WORSHIP KOSEN, A FOX SPIRIT.
FOX MASKS, AS WELL AS RICE AND REEDS BEING WORN LIKE TAILS.
CLATTER
CLATTER
IS THERE SOME DEEPER MEANING TO ALL THIS?
...BUT I CAN SPOT A FEW OTHERS WITH GREEN EYES, AS WELL.
EVERY ONE IS A MAN WEARING BLUE.
THERE'S ONE GREEN TANUKI WALKING RIGHT NEXT TO ME...
THE CLACKING OF WOODEN SHOES INTERMINGLING WITH THE CHIMES OF SO MANY BELLS, AND THE CHIRPING BIRDS...
... ALMOST SOUNDS LIKE THE CRIES OF A FOX.


KSHHK
SSZZ
KSHHK
IS THAT SOUND INSECTS JUMPING INTO THE TORCHES?
AND SO MANY, AT THAT.
KSHHK
THERE ARE A LOT OF GRASSHOP-PERS THIS YEAR.
TING
THAT'S WHY THE FESTIVAL IS SO BIG.
NO, I DON'T KNOW.
CLAAAANG
CLAAAANG
DO YOU KNOW WHY THE PEOPLE HERE WORSHIP THE FOX, GOD OF GOOD HARVEST?
SAY...
CLAAAANG

LONG AGO, A TRIBE OF PEOPLE LIVED IN THIS REGION.
BUT THEN, A DIFFERENT TRIBE ARRIVED FROM THE WEST.
BUT WHEN THE WESTERN PEOPLE BEGAN TO SETTLE AND BEAR CHILDREN HERE...
...THEIR NEIGHBORS GREW FURIOUS, AND CAME TO TAKE THEIR FIELDS.
MOST OF THE VILLAGERS WANTED TO DRIVE THE FOREIGNERS AWAY.
BUT A FEW WELCOMED THE STRANGERS IN.
KNOWLEDGE OF CULTIVATING ABUNDANT HARVESTS AND HOW TO DEAL WITH HARMFUL PESTS WAS VERY VALUABLE, AND THAT...
...IS SOME-THING THE STRANGERS HAD.
THIS CAME TO PASS OVER AND OVER.
EVENTUALLY, THEY BUILT THIS VILLAGE, HIDDEN AWAY NEAR A SPRING...
...TO ENSURE THEIR DESCENDENTS WOULD NO LONGER BE ATTACKED.

THE FOXES THAT ARRIVED WERE WHITE, SO THE MASKS START OUT WHITE AS WELL. SPOTLESS.
BUT AS THEY SETTLE IN, THEIR SURROUNDINGS CHANGE THEM. COLOR THEM.
...TO REFER TO FOREIGNERS AS THOUGH THEY ARE BEASTS ON TWO LEGS.
AND THAT LEADS INTO THE FOX.
IT'S NOT AT ALL UNCOMMON FOR THE NATIVE POPULACE OF A LAND...
THE FESTIVAL COSTUMES RESEMBLE THE FOX ...
... BECAUSE THE VILLAGERS THEMSELVES ARE ITS DES-CENDENTS.
TING
THE MEN OF THIS VILLAGE...
...ARE UNABLE TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN CERTAIN COLORS.
THE RARE WOMAN CAN'T, TOO.

YEP.
WHICH IS WHY SOME ARE PAINTED GREEN.
NOW WHERE HAVE I HEARD A STORY LIKE THAT BEFORE?
THE TALE OF A COLOR-BLIND PEOPLE ...
...AND A GRADUAL TAKEOVER SPANNING GENERA-TIONS.
OF THE PEOPLE WHO FLED FROM THE WEST...
...SOME MOVED TO WHERE THE CAPITAL IS NOW, AND INTEGRATED INTO THE EMPEROR'S LINEAGE.
THIS VILLAGE'S ANCESTORS MUST BE THE SAME PEOPLE.
PLUCK

CRSHH
HEY.
IT WON'T KILL YOU, BUT IT IS POISONOUS. IT DOESN'T REALLY TASTE VERY GOOD, EITHER.
I KNOW.
SQK
SQK

NOM
SHE'D REALLY EAT IT, KNOWING ALL THAT?
LANTERN PLANTS ARE ALSO USED TO FACILITATE ABORTION.

STREET STALLS SET UP AROUND THE SHRINE?
MUNCH
MUNCH
I SMELL FOOD.
SORRY!
THAT'S GROSS.
PTOO
C'MON! LET'S GET SOME SKEWERS!

I'LL GET CHICKEN.
THE LOCUSTS ARE NICE AND PLUMP THIS TIME OF YEAR!

...I DOUBT I'LL HAVE FROG ANY TIME SOON.
FROG ...?
HOW ABOUT FROG?

WHAT'S WITH THE FARAWAY LOOK IN YOUR EYE, MAOMAO?
WHAT LOOK? I'M WEARING A MASK.
OKAY! ONE LOCUST AND ONE CHICKEN, PLEASE!

MMff
WHAT IS IT?
BLEEH!
I JUST SAID THAT'S GROSS.
NOM
MUNCH
MUNCH
MILDLY SEASONED, BUT THE HERBAL FLAVOR COMES THROUGH.
THEY SURE DON'T.
THE WINGS AND LEGS GIVE IT AWAY. EVEN IF THEY'RE PLUCKED OFF, THEY TASTE TOTALLY DIFFERENT.
THAT STALL'S RUNNING A SCAM.
SOME OF THESE ARE GRASS-HOPPERS!
YUCK!
PWEH PWEH
OKAY? THEY ALL LOOK THE SAME, DON'T THEY?

THIS ONE'S GOOD!
OH!
I SUPPOSE IT'S TYPICAL IN FARMING VILLAGES TO EAT LOCUSTS. JUST ANOTHER FORM OF PEST CONTROL.
... FARMERS WILL COME TO THE PLEASURE DISTRICT TO SELL THEM.
SOME YEARS, WHEN INSECTS ARE PARTICULARLY ABUNDANT ...
IS THERE A TOWN IN THE PRAIRIE BEYOND THIS FOREST?

LOOK, MAOMAO!
FWP
SEE WHO'S SITTING AT THE MASK OFFERING?
THAT MASK...
EVERY YEAR, CHILDREN ARE CHOSEN ...
TO SIT THERE, IN PLACE OF THE GOD.
THIS YEAR, KYOU-U WAS CHOSEN.
THAT PUNK? HIS BRUSH STROKES ARE SO FINE AND DELICATE.
PRETTY IMPRESSIVE MASK, ACTUALLY.

HE'S SITTING THERE SO CALMLY.
EVERYONE JUMPS AT THE CHANCE TO DO IT.
HEH HEH
BUT THEY DO SWITCH OFF BEFORE THEIR FEET GO NUMB.
STILL. I WONDER IF THIS MAKES FOR A GOOD MEMORY.

I THINK HE'S GOING TO FINISH UP SOON.
LET'S TURN IN OUR MASKS AND WAIT AT THE SHRINE.

TOO

LOOK AT THIS.
THE ENDS OF MINE ARE DIFFERENT.
I GOT A BAD ONE.
OH, MY.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

YOU SHOULD'VE BEEN MORE CAREFUL CHOOSING.
SOME PEOPLE THINK GIVING UP RIPE EARS OF RICE FOR THIS IS A WASTE.
THEY CAN BE SO STINGY.
THE CHIEF'S FIELDS ALWAYS GROW SLOWER, EVERY YEAR.
HE ONLY EVER DONATES THE UNRIPE STUFF.
HM MM
WHAT?! WHY!
THE FOX'LL CURSE HIM!
AW, THAT'S THE PROBLEM.
BUT I GOT IT FROM THE CHIEF...
RSTL
EVERYONE KNOWS THAT.
IF YOU'RE NEW TO ALL THIS, BE SURE TO TAKE IT TO HEART. YOU KNOW, A LEARNING EXPERIENCE.

ARE YOU SURE?
YES.
I DON'T REALLY BUY INTO THIS ANYWAY.
HERE.
GOOD FOR YOU!
BOW
HOW'D I DO, SIS?
YOU DID GREAT! NICE JOB!
NICE JOB AT WHAT? SITTING THERE?
TAP
TAP

OKAY!
FIRE?
HEH HEH
YES, YES. HURRY AND OFFER YOUR MASK.
YOU WANT TO SEE THE FIRE, RIGHT?
WISH MOTHER COULD'A SEEN THAT!
THERE, WE FLOAT A RAFT WITH A WATCHTOWER.
EVERY YEAR, THE MASKS ARE GATHERED ON IT AND IT'S SET ALIGHT.
DOWN THE STAIRS ON THE OTHER SIDE IS A POND.
I DIDN'T WRITE A WISH.
WELL, YOU'RE NOT REALLY SUPERSTITIOUS, ARE YOU?
...THE WISHES WRITTEN ON THEM WILL BE CARRIED INTO THE HEAVENS AND COME TRUE.
IF THE MASKS BURN UP WITHOUT EVER FALLING INTO THE WATER...

MAYBE SO.
ANY EFFORT SPENT ON A WISH IS BETTER SPENT WORKING TOWARD REALIZING IT IN REALITY.
IT'S NOT SUPERSTI-TION!
IT'LL DEFINITELY COME TRUE!
I DREW A REALLY PRETTY PICTURE ON MY MASK, JUST LIKE LAST YEAR!
AND I WROTE OUT MY WISH SUPER CAREFULLY!
IT HAS TO COME TRUE. IT HAS TO.
WHAT DID YOU WISH FOR?
HMPH!
NUH UH! NO TELLING!
OKAY. WHAT-EVER.
NOW, NOW, YOU TWO.
WE'D BETTER HURRY, OR ELSE WE'LL MISS IT!
HUH ?!

THAT'S THE WATCH-TOWER?
LOOK, THERE'S THE FLAME.
IT'S THAT KID FROM BEFORE.
DIDN'T YOU WANT TO DO THIS, KYOU-U?
I'M HAPPY TO HAND THE JOB OVER TO SOMEONE ELSE.
I'M NOT A KID.

CRACKLE
CRACKLE
THEY SET IT ALIGHT WITH A BURNING ARROW?
F
GRK
GRK
WM

CRACKLE
CRACKLE
FWOOM
SHH

ISN'T IT STRANGE?
THE WATCHTOWER BURNS UP, BUT THE RAFT DOESN'T.
IT'S BECAUSE OF THE WATER BELOW.
BWRM
BWRM

FIDGET
FIDGET
THIS FAR AWAY...
...IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO TELL WHICH MASK IS YOURS.
AH...
...BUT OVER HALF OF THEM WON'T MAKE IT.
THE SMOKE CARRIES THE MASKS UP IN A BREATHTAKING SIGHT...
THE UNFULFILLED WISHES SINK TO THE BOTTOM OF THE POND...
AND NOURISH THE BLESSING.

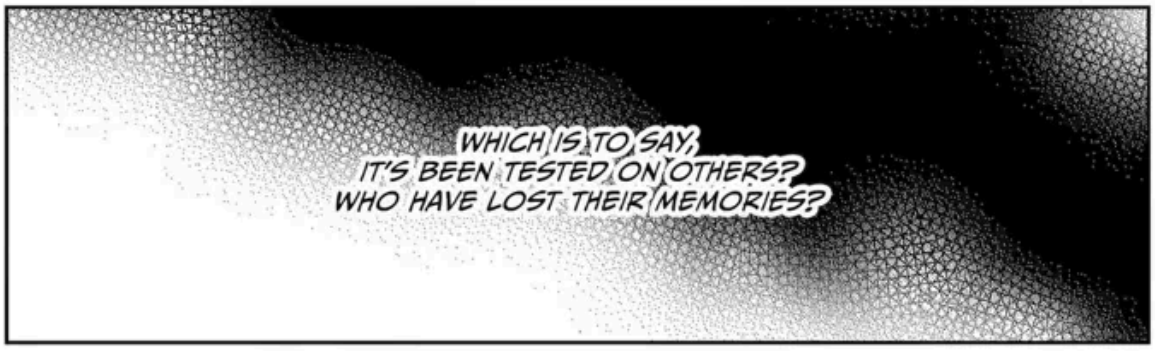
INSECTS CANNOT SURVIVE THE WINTER.
ALL THEY LEAVE BEHIND IS THEIR CHILDREN.
WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

AH!
YOU'RE BACK!
HAVE YOU EATEN?
WE CAN EAT MORE.
LET ME GRAB SOME-THING.

YOUTIAO AND SOY MILK.
OH.
THE SOY MILK HAS NO SMELL.
GINGER AND HONEY MIXED IN TO MASK IT.
GLANCE
STARE..
IT LOOKED LIKE A MEDICINE BOOK...
...BUT NO. IT'S A HANDWRITTEN BOOK ON INSECTS.
WHAT?

YOU KNOW YOU'RE A HOSTAGE, RIGHT?
FWMP
WELL. ISN'T IT TIME?
YOU MADE A PROMISE, DIDN'T YOU? READY TO MAKE GOOD ON IT?
YOU MUST NOT BE ABLE TO MOVE RIGHT AWAY, RIGHT?
WHAT ELSE GOES IN? HOW IS THE BODY AFTER REVIVAL?
YES, AND?! WHAT ABOUT THE REVIVAL ELIXIR?!
THORNAPPLE AND BLOWFISH, RIGHT?! WHAT'S THE RATIO?
...
ZOOP

...MY UNDER-STANDING IS THE DRUG WAS MEANT TO KNOCK SOMEONE OUT...
...IN THE PROCESS OF ARTIFICIALLY PRODUCING SLAVES.
I DON'T THINK THORNAPPLE IS NECESSARY AS FAR AS PROLONGING THE COMA.
THIS IS THE WORST IT DID TO ME...
...BUT A SMALL MISTAKE COULD HAVE COST ME MY MEMORY.


WHICH IS TO SAY, IT'S BEEN TESTED ON OTHERS? WHO HAVE LOST THEIR MEMORIES?

BUT MORE THAN THAT...
I'M WELL AWARE THAT INCLUDES HUMAN EXPERIMENTATION.
THERE'S ALWAYS A PRICE TO PAY IN CRAFTING MEDICINE.

GRIN
SO HOW HAVE YOU IMPROVED ON THE FORMULA ?!
I JUST CAN'T CONTROL...
...THIS ALL-CONSUMING CURIOSITY.
HAVE YOU TRIED IT YET?!

I'M NOT TESTING IT ON YOU.
SHEEN
ONLY ON ANIMALS SO FAR.
THEN ...!
!
WHY NOT?!
I JUST TOLD YOU. YOU'RE A HOSTAGE.
NO NEED TO HOLD BACK, REALLY!
AM I?
SHOULDN'T YOU BE KEEPING ME A BIT MORE RESTRAINED, THEN?

IT'S NICE YOU TWO ARE GETTING ALONG SO WELL.
HEH HEH
YOU BOTH HAVE SO FEW FRIENDS, I'M GLAD TO SEE THIS!
SHUT UP.
STOP TALKING.
...
AH HA HA HA